

Doctrine of God (Theology Proper)

Christian Doctrine Made Simple: Systematic Theology for the Person in the Pew

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“In a modest London drawing-room, two gentlemen of **atheistic** inclination found themselves in a most animated dispute concerning the Almighty. After much huffing, puffing, and rearranging of waistcoats, one finally exclaimed, ‘My good sir, if it suits you, you may steadfastly refuse to believe in **your God**, and I shall, with equal determination, refuse to believe in **mine**. And now, if we might return to matters of actual consequence?’”

1.0 Introduction

The doctrine of God—often called *Theology Proper*—is the foundation of all Christian belief. Every other doctrine flows from who God is: His nature, His character, His works, and His purposes. Scripture does not begin by arguing for God’s existence; it simply **declares** Him. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible reveals a God who is personal, eternal, holy, sovereign, and actively involved with His creation. Understanding who God is shapes how we worship, how we pray, how we live, and how we understand ourselves.

1.1 Definition

The doctrine of God is the study of God’s being, attributes, and works as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. A general definition of the Doctrine of God is *Theology Proper is what the Bible teaches about who God is and how He acts*. Wayne Grudem defines theology proper as “The study of God and His attributes.”¹

This doctrine does not attempt to define God exhaustively—no human mind can—but it seeks to understand what God has made known about Himself. In this section of systematic theology, we

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 143.

are focusing on what the New Testament identifies as *God the Father*, using the Trinitarian categories that the Church later articulated more precisely after the close of the New Testament canon.

“To think rightly about God is the foundation of all true theology.” — J. I. Packer

2. Biblical Vocabulary

It would be impossible in a brief essay to cover all the vocabulary referencing God in both the Old and New Testaments. Below we cover just a sample of the more prominent terms.

In the Old Testament, several key Hebrew terms reveal the character and work of God. The word **אֱלֹהִים** (**’ēlōhîm**) appears more than 2,500 times and, though grammatically plural, is consistently paired with singular verbs when referring to Israel’s God, emphasizing His majesty, fullness of power, and absolute sovereignty as Creator and Judge.

God’s covenant name, **יהוה** (**YHWH**, “**Yahweh**”), is referred to as the tetragrammaton (the "four letters") and occurs nearly 6,800 times. It is tied to the self-revelation “I AM” in Exodus 3:14, expressing His self-existence, eternality, and covenant faithfulness; English Bibles typically render it as LORD in small capital letters to distinguish it from places where the Hebrew text actually uses the word for "lord." In the Hebrew text, there are only the Hebrew consonants written with no vowels. The name was (and still is) considered too sacred to actually pronounce so the Jews substituted the word *Adonay*, meaning Lord, and when vowels do appear with the four consonants, they are the vowels for that word, reminding the reader to say the word Lord instead of trying to pronounce the divine name. It is thought that when Jesus referred to Himself as the "I Am" in the seven I AM statements, that the implication is that he was identifying Himself with the Exodus 3:14 passage of the self-revelation of the name of God.

The title **אֲדֹנָי** (**’ādōnāy**), meaning “Lord” or “Master,” highlights God’s authority and rule and became the spoken substitute for the divine name in Jewish tradition. Other significant titles include **אֵל שַׁדַּי** (**’El Shaddai**), “God Almighty,” which stresses God’s omnipotence and sufficiency, especially in covenant contexts, and **אֵל עֶלְיוֹן** (**’El ’Elyōn**), “God Most High,” a title that underscores His supremacy over all nations, powers, and spiritual beings.

The New Testament continues this revelation with its own vocabulary. The primary Greek term **θεός** (**theos**) functions as the standard word for “God,” most often referring to God the Father, though it is also applied to the Son in passages such as John 1:1 and John 20:28, affirming the full deity of Christ. The title **κύριος** (**kyrios**), meaning “Lord,” is used for both the Father and the Son; when applied to Jesus, it frequently echoes the Old Testament use of YHWH in the Greek

Septuagint², making “Jesus is Lord” a profoundly theological confession of His divine identity. Finally, the relational term **πατήρ (patēr)**, “Father,” expresses God’s personal and covenantal nature. Jesus uses it uniquely of His own relationship to God, while believers are taught to pray “Our Father,” revealing both intimacy and authority within the Trinitarian framework.

These terms reveal God’s power, holiness, covenant faithfulness, and personal involvement with His people.

“If God were small enough to be understood,
He wouldn’t be big enough to be worshiped.”
— a modern proverb

3. Nature of the Doctrine

Scripture reveals several essential truths about the nature of God. He is **Spirit**, not limited by physical form or bound by material constraints. He is **personal**, speaking, willing, loving, judging, and entering into real relationship with His creatures. God is **infinite**, without limit in His being or perfections, and **eternal**, existing without beginning or end. He is **immutable**, meaning unchanging in His character, purposes, and promises. Scripture also presents God as **holy**, meaning both morally perfect and set apart³

Although Scripture affirms that God is one—the only true and living God—it also reveals that this one God is Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three coequal and coeternal Persons sharing the same divine essence. This creates a deliberate and important tension in the biblical witness. On the one hand stands the foundational confession of Israel, the **Shema**, where Moses declares, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD (יהוה) is our God, the LORD (יהוה) is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NASB). This affirmation of God’s oneness shaped Jewish monotheism for centuries.

On the other hand, both the Old and New Testaments present the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as distinct Persons who act, speak, and relate in ways that cannot be reduced to mere modes or manifestations. At times, all three appear within the same passage—such as at Jesus’ baptism or in the Great Commission—revealing a unity of essence alongside a distinction of Persons. The doctrine of the Trinity arises from holding these two strands of biblical revelation together without diminishing either one.⁴

² Septuagint refers to the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced about 200 BC in Alexandria, Egypt. It is often referred to with the letters LXX, meaning 70, as the tradition is that it was produced by 72 Jewish rabbis. However, it was too lengthy to write out the Roman numerals for 72 so it was shortened to LXX (70).

³ The technical term for this is “transcendent,” which you will find in many books on theology.

⁴ It needs to be noted that the term “trinity” is not “Biblical” in that it is not found in the actual Bible text. It was first used by a Christian leader by the name of **Tertullian** about 190 AD. The actual formulation of the doctrine of

These truths form the bedrock of Christian theology.

“We know God only because He first chooses to make Himself known.” — Herman Bavinck

4. Biblical Development

4.1 Old Testament

The Old Testament consistently emphasizes God’s identity and work through its unfolding narrative. It presents **God as Creator**, the One who brings the heavens and the earth into existence by His sovereign word (Genesis 1–2). It reveals **God as Covenant Maker**, calling Abraham, forming a people for Himself, and establishing His law at Sinai (Genesis 12; Exodus 19–20). God is portrayed as **holy**, exalted in purity and majesty, as Isaiah witnessed in his temple vision (Isaiah 6). He is also **Sovereign King**, ruling over all nations and all creation, a theme celebrated throughout Psalms 93–99. The Old Testament further depicts God as **Redeemer**, delivering His people from bondage and acting with steadfast love on their behalf (Exodus 6). Above all, it affirms that He is **the only God**, a truth encapsulated in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NASB).

over all things and accomplishing His purposes without frustration. God is good, displaying kindness, faithfulness, grace, and righteousness in all His works. The revelation of God’s character and His relationship with creation unfolds progressively through Scripture, and this unfolding is closely tied to the series of covenants He establishes with key figures in the biblical narrative, as summarized in the table below.

Major Biblical Covenants		
Covenant	Description	Primary Biblical References
Edenic Covenant	God’s original arrangement with Adam and Eve in the garden, establishing humanity’s purpose, stewardship, and blessing before the Fall.	Genesis 1:26–30; 2:15–17
Adamic Covenant	God’s post-Fall covenantal pronouncements including judgment, the curse, and the first promise of redemption (protoevangelium).	Genesis 3:14–19
Noahic Covenant	God’s covenant with Noah and all creation, promising never again to destroy the earth by flood and establishing the sign of the rainbow.	Genesis 8:20–22; 9:1–17
Abrahamic Covenant	God’s covenant with Abraham promising land, descendants, and blessing to all nations through his	Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–14

the Trinity, explained in a later essay, was not solidified until the second ecumenical council called the First Council of Constantinople, in 381 AD.

Major Biblical Covenants		
Covenant	Description	Primary Biblical References
	seed; foundational to Israel's identity.	
Mosaic Covenant	God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, giving the Law and forming Israel as a holy nation under God's rule.	Exodus 19–24; Deuteronomy 5
Priestly Covenant	God's covenant with Phinehas granting a perpetual priesthood to his descendants as a reward for zeal for God's holiness.	Numbers 25:10–13
Davidic Covenant	God's covenant with David promising an eternal throne, a lasting dynasty, and a future king from his line.	2 Samuel 7:8–16; Psalm 89
New Covenant	God's promised covenant of internal transformation, forgiveness of sins, and the indwelling Spirit, inaugurated by Christ.	Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:25–27; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8

The Old Testament progressively reveals God's character through His actions, promises, and covenant relationship with Israel, while the New Testament brings this revelation to its fullness by unveiling God's purposes and nature in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” — A.W. Tozer

4.2 New Testament

The New Testament continues and expands the Old Testament's revelation of God by unveiling His character and purposes with greater clarity and fullness. Jesus Himself **reveals the Father**, making Him known in a way no one else could (John 1:18⁵; 14:9). He also **shares the divine name “I AM”**, identifying Himself with the God of Israel (John 8:58). The New Testament further shows that **the Holy Spirit is fully divine and personal**, as seen when lying to the Spirit is equated with lying to God (Acts 5:3–4). The triune nature of God is explicitly displayed in the **baptismal formula**, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are named together in one divine identity (Matthew 28:19). God's **love** is revealed supremely in the cross of Christ (Romans 5:8), while His **sovereignty** is displayed in the work of salvation, planned and accomplished according to His purpose (Ephesians 1). Finally, God's **holiness and justice** are perfectly fulfilled in Christ's atoning work, where righteousness and mercy meet (Romans 3:21–26).

⁵ It is worth noting that the term used in John 1:18 for “make known” is the Greek verb ἐξηγήσατο (exēgēsato), which comes from the lexical form ἐξηγέομαι (exēgeomai), meaning “to explain, interpret, or declare.” This is also the word from which we derive the English term “exegesis,” the work a pastor performs when preaching an expository sermon that draws out the meaning of a biblical passage.

The NT does not replace the OT revelation—it completes it.

5. Consequences / Implications

Understanding who God is shapes every dimension of the Christian life. His greatness and goodness draw us into worship, and His fatherly care invites us to approach Him confidently in prayer. God’s holiness calls His people to live in obedience, while His sovereignty provides deep assurance in the midst of trials. Knowing that we are made in His image forms our identity, and His character establishes the foundation for all ethics, defining what is right and wrong. God’s heart for the nations fuels the mission of the church, and His promises anchor the believer’s hope for the future.

The doctrine of God is not abstract—it is deeply practical.

6. Remedy / Divine Provision

Unlike hamartiology⁶, this section is not about “remedy for sin” but about **how God makes Himself known** so we can truly know Him.

God graciously makes Himself known in multiple ways. Through *general revelation*, creation, conscience, and providence testify to His power and divine nature (Psalm 19; Romans 1). Through *special revelation*, Scripture discloses His character, His will, and His redemptive purposes. In the *incarnation*, Jesus Christ stands as the perfect and final revelation of God, the One in whom God has spoken fully and definitively (Hebrews 1:1–3). And through the ministry of the *Holy Spirit*, God illumines Scripture, opens the heart to truth, and enables believers to know Him personally and intimately.

God does not remain hidden; He graciously **reveals Himself**.

“If God made us in His image, we have certainly returned the favor.” — often attributed to Mark Twain;
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7. Special Issues / Clarifications

Several important theological clarifications help guard our understanding of God from common misunderstandings. God cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind, yet He can be truly and personally known. The Trinity does not mean three gods, but one God who exists eternally

⁶ Hamartiology, the Doctrine of Sin, is covered in detail in a later essay in this series.

in three distinct Persons. God's sovereignty never cancels human responsibility, for Scripture consistently affirms both realities. His immutability does not imply inactivity; rather, He acts in history without any change to His nature or character. When Scripture speaks of the "hand of God" or the "eyes of the Lord," such anthropomorphic language is metaphorical, helping finite minds grasp divine actions. And God's wrath is not opposed to His love; it is the necessary expression of His holiness against sin.

These clarifications help prevent common misunderstandings.

Conclusion

The doctrine of God is the cornerstone of Christian belief. Everything else—creation, salvation, the church, and the Christian life—rests on who God is. Scripture reveals a God who is holy, sovereign, loving, just, and faithful. He is the Creator, Redeemer, and King. He is one God in three Persons. And He invites His people to know Him, trust Him, and walk with Him.

"The most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like."

A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.

Recommended Reading

Understanding the doctrine of God benefits from resources written at different levels. The following lists provide **accessible books for younger readers** and **scholarly works for deeper study**, each with full bibliographic references.

For Younger Readers (Accessible Introductions)

- **Erickson, Millard J. *Introducing Christian Doctrine*.** Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. A simplified version of Erickson's major theology, written clearly enough for motivated teens and adult beginners.
- **Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*.** New York: HarperOne, 2001. Classic, conversational, and deeply insightful; excellent for forming a basic understanding of God's nature and moral law.
- **Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*.** Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993. Warm, devotional, and accessible; ideal for helping younger readers grasp God's character.
- **Sproul, R. C. *The Holiness of God*.** Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998. Clear, gripping, and unforgettable—especially strong on God's holiness and majesty.
- **Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*.** New York: HarperCollins, 1978. Short chapters, vivid language, and a powerful introduction to God's attributes.

For Scholars (Advanced & Academic Works)

- **Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*.** Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. A monumental, rigorous treatment of the doctrine of God from a Reformed perspective.
- **Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*.** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996. A classic, concise, and highly structured presentation of God's being and attributes.
- **Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*.** Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Philosophically rich, biblically grounded, and exceptionally clear.
- **Muller, Richard A. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes*.** Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003. The definitive historical-theological study of classical theism in the Reformed tradition.
- **Sanders, Fred. *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*.** Wheaton: Crossway, 2010. A modern, scholarly yet readable exploration of Trinitarian theology.
- **Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*.** Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Bros., 1947. The foundational medieval treatment of God's existence, nature, and attributes.